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REVISED VERSION(2010) of
"Through the eyes of Mandela,Sisulu and Tambo: An Appraisal of the
Southern African Liberation Movements,
Darfur and Kenya
and US policies towards Africa"

A talk originally given at Chapman University,
Orange, California

February 25, 2008
By

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Chicago

In June of 1980, I wrote the following passage in an article in the
Black Scholar entitled "Angola is part of all of us:"

Africa faces serious struggles in the decade of the
1980's... 'The grieved lands,' as the Neto poem says, face the
jinglyings of various forms of modern slavery's bondage...
But the struggle ahead in Namibia and South Africa, the
struggles for parity and the right to eat in independent Africa,
witness Ghana,Liberia,Zaire, the Central African Republic
are all going to pose situations demanding a more serious
level of understanding and commitment. The once a year
solidarity show is not going "to cut bait" much longer.

This talk seeks to address several fundamental questions. First,
what are the legacies of the African liberation movements of which
the world-renown struggle in South Africa led by the African
National Congress (ANC) is one example? Various scholars and
commentators have highlighted the African liberation movements
and African independence struggles, in general, as being amongst
the foremost social/political phenomena in the twentieth century.

David Birmingham asserts, for instance, that “the decolonization of Africa was one of the turning points in the history of the post-war world...[capturing] the imagination of a new generation of idealists who enthusiastically proclaimed their belief in racial equality and individual liberty...”(Birmingham,1995,p.1).

Famed Canadian political science scholar and activist John Saul notes in the Shillington edited, Encyclopedia of African History that “the liberation of Southern Africa was the final act in the continent-wide drama of nationalist-driven decolonization that was at the centre of African history in the post-World War II period.”

Historian Robin Kelley’s book, Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination is devoted to an in-depth discussion of the embracing of the liberation movements and the struggles for national independence by an entire generation of black, brown and white students and activists all over the globe. And, perhaps, most importantly of all, Bernard “Ben” Makhosezwe Magubane’s various works, from his *The Ties that Bind* (1987) to his magnificent SADET series, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* (2008), remind us that the essence of the unfolding pageant of Southern African history is derived from the thoughts, feelings and actions of ordinary people, African men, women and children who want to see their lives made better. The liberation movements were made up of thousands of regular folk, not super-heroes. As Magubane wrote in a 2007 Nordic Institute volume examining memory in South African history, *History Making and Present Day Politics*:

In 1961, to celebrate Freedom Day June 26, Fighting Talk, edited by Ruth First, devoted a volume to South African history...many readers, like many of those who wrote the articles, had taken part in that kind of event and had themselves been makers of history. They were men and women, who moved by the injustices, did what had to be done...

There were few heroes of gigantic statue in these episodes,

few dramatic moments in which the face of a country is suddenly transformed. Instead there is the record of a multitude of indecisive and inconclusive struggles, of strikes won and lost, of campaigns completed and uncompleted; there are multitudes of nameless faceless ordinary people, some few remembered but many forgotten. Can this be history?(p.278)

Let me hasten to add about Birmingham, Kelly, Saul and Magubane that theirs is not the only point-of-view and certainly not the dominant perspective amongst non-African audiences. Ronald Reagan's first Secretary of State, General Alexander Haig, put forward another view unequivocally when he said, just after assuming the reins of the US State Department, "the so-called wars of national liberation are putting in jeopardy our ability to influence world events ...and to assure access to raw materials." A similar point of view is available in the 1992 book by Chester Crocker, former U. S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the 1980's. Entitled *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood*, the author's orientation is unambiguous in two sentences in the opening chapter where he writes, **"to me, the West was on trial in Southern Africa: our values and principles, our system and our global standing. It was time for the West to compete in shaping the destiny of this region."**(Emphasis added)

A second major area that I will address in this talk is raised in a repeated mantra found in Western coverage of African events. That mantra is the constant pattern of framing all African social and political phenomena, but especially all African conflicts in terms of "tribes" and "tribalism." As noted by a 1997 Background paper by the African Policy Information Center, begin a discussion of Africa and African issues with people from Western countries and immediately **"tribe"** comes up. (A parallel pattern takes place in

discussions about native Americans; “tribe” and “tribalism” often shape intellectual formulations and discourse in this arena, as well. An article in the December 31, 2007 New York Times by Jeffrey Gettleman on Kenya illustrates the point I am making vividly. In language typifying Western media coverage Gettleman wrote from Nairobi, describing events in Kenya, “the Kenyan election seems to have tapped into an **atavistic vein of tribal tension** that always lay beneath the surface in Kenya but until now had not provoked widespread mayhem.”

Let me not sound mono-causal. Western, especially US coverage of Africa is actually more multi-dimensional and not merely “tribes” and “tribalism”-centered. Journalist Madeline Bunting quite helpfully noted in a January 18-24 edition of the British Guardian Weekly ... “the Kenya that we love [the Kenya of Redford and Streep in ‘Out of Africa’-my additional comment] is reflective of the persistent western fantasy of the exotic that we project on to Africa...the Africa that is the creation of peaceful palms and whitesanded beaches; of our tourist imaginations; it strips out what we can’t or don’t want to understand...”

The “tribal” (now the more politically correct use *ethnic*) or “tribalism” motif also shows the Western world’s intrinsic reliance upon patterns of rac(e)ing and racism. Why don’t we talk of Irish tribalism, British or Spanish tribes? Answers Madeline Bunting:

“...only in Africa is inter-ethnic violence cast as ‘ancient,’ immutable tribalism, associated in the European mindset with barbarism and irrationality. It’s a language of self-congratulation- we [white folk, my addition] are civilized, Africans are not.”

What I hope to address in this talk today then is the question: If tribalism and ethnic conflict are not the sole baseline motivations for the antagonisms and conflicts in Africa today, then what are?

Are there common elements, themes, factors, players that can be identified and analyzed present in the crises that are being played out in countries and regions like Kenya, the Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Algeria, the Central African Republic, Darfur, and the Eastern Congo. Are there similar, if not related, failings that are surfacing in South Africa and Namibia, in Angola and Zimbabwe? Then there is the uniqueness, the distinct cultural and historical formations which each country "brings to the table." Is it "fair" to discuss the failings in South Africa, Namibia, Angola and Mozambique in the same phrases, using the same measures as those used in a discussion about Zimbabwe?

Clearly, another question that must be posed is whether the patterns we are seeing develop in various locales in Africa are all that different from failings that are steadily appearing in other parts of the world, including the USA and Western Europe. I long to see Western commentaries that apply the 'failed state' paradigm not only to the poor countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean but also to the country that brought the world Katrina, the Jena Six, Commander Jon Burge, Abu Greib/Guantanamo torture and Texas barbecue-rates of capital punishment.

Thinking, I have very deliberately titled my remarks "Through the eyes of Mandela, Sisulu and Tambo." I have done so for various reasons. First, I want to address the lionization and commoditization of Nelson Mandela that is done in this country. This gross pattern of adorification does a grave disservice to all those who have struggled and sacrificed to end the apartheid system in order to build a new South Africa, and to Madiba, as well. South Africans should not feel "picked on." It is not just Mandela that US audiences and markets have so thoroughly and completely objectified and distorted. Every year we see new and gross distorting and re-shaping of the meaning and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, the cooptation and corporatization of his role and

significance in American history by sympathetic and adoring companies like McDonald's and Walmart as they persist in practices that are the very essence of the policies and practices that King fought all his life.

Nelson Mandela is the first to always point out that he was not alone. He became the leader that he became because of the people who were with him in the struggle. He played the role that he played because of the roles & contributions of many of his other mates and comrades. Amongst these, two other visionary-type leaders must immediately be mentioned, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo. This is not to say, I hasten to assert, that those who "signed the sun with their honor" in the South African struggle are limited to these three giants or to males. *Charlotte Maxeke, Francis Baard, Gertrude Shope, Amilia Cachalia, Ruth First, Helen Joseph, Ray Alexander, Lilian Ngoyi, Fatima Meer, Winnie Mandela* and so, so many others could and should be cited as we discuss those who struggled and sacrificed to build the new Southern Africa.

Allow me to turn for a moment or two to a brief discussion of the African liberation movements* and the legacies that they have left.

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- * By "African Liberation movements" I refer to those organized political movements which were formed to free specific territories and peoples from colonial occupation and rule. Most of these movements began as strictly non-violent political or cultural initiatives protesting colonial rule. Ultimately they resorted to the use of armed force. Additionally by the mid 1960's the movements to which I refer were recognized and supported by the organization of African Unity (OAU), several socialist countries (e.g. the USSR), some Nordic countries (e.g. Sweden) and some globally organized international bodies such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). They were often labeled as the genuine liberation movements distinguishing them from other organizations such as COREMO in Mozambique, the FNLA or UNITA in Angola or the PAC in South Africa. Included in my understanding of "African Liberation Movements" are:

Movement	Country	Date of Founding
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One mantle is that of *leadership*, not Westminster parliamentary-type leadership, not leadership based in having lots of money, getting lots of money or spending lots of money like the so-called “leadership” that we see in the current American presidential electoral process. It is a leadership that is rooted in ideas and in relationships with people. Some have labeled it *prophetic* leadership.

This prophetic leadership that I believe, at points, characterized most of the Southern African liberation struggles is a leadership rooted in a full and complete embrace of the daily and pedantic struggles of ordinary people, whether mine workers in South Africa, dock workers in Mozambique or peasants in Guinea-Bissau, Angola or Zimbabwe. It is an informed and participatory leadership, one predicated upon a full knowledge of the circumstances and conditions of the people of a particular country and/or region. It is a leadership that is rooted in knowing and embracing the languages, songs, poetry, traditions and history.

Amilcar Cabral, that extraordinarily talented, but virtually unknown(in the USA), liberation movement leader from Guinea-Bissau puts it best in his stock address to his cadre in the PAIGC

MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola)	Angola	1956
FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front)	Mozambique	1962
SWAPO (Southwest African people's Organization)	Namibia	1960
ANC (African National Congress)	South Africa	1912
ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union)	Zimbabwe	1961
ZANU (Zimbabwe African national Union)	Zimbabwe	1963
PAIGC (African party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde)	Guinea-Bissau Cape Verde Islands	1956

Another characteristic that all these movements shared was that during the Cold War period they were all shunned by Western governments (especially the USA) as “communist” or “terrorist”. Amongst Western countries, only the Nordic countries, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland, were an exception to this pattern. From 1969 to 1990 the government of Sweden disbursed 1.7 billion Swedish kronor (SEK) directly to six Southern African liberation movements, ANC, FRELIMO, MPLA, SWAPO, ZANU and ZAPU (Aid to the PAIGC was in another category.)

in Guine-Bissau. His talk quoted below exemplifies that “informed leadership:”

“Bear always in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone’s head. They are fighting...for material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to see their children’s lives go forward[some translations say at this point: ‘to guarantee the future of their children...’] However it is put, it is the heart of this penetrating observation and is vintage Cabral!] National liberation, war on colonialism, building for peace and progress-independence- all that will remain meaningless for the people unless it brings a real improvement in conditions of life. It is pointless to liberate a region if its populations then remain without essential goods.”

(p. 122, Davidson, The Liberation of Guine)

This visionary, prophetic leadership is derived from and subordinate to certain cardinal convictions. One such conviction is an unyielding belief in the primacy of the masses of the people. Nelson Mandela put it quite simply in his repeated assertion in the early ‘90’s after his release from prison when he would say, “It is not me or the other leaders; it is not the kings and the princes who make history but the ordinary people!” Cabral, when challenged with the impossibility of doing guerrilla struggle in Guine-Bissau because it lacked the proper conditions, i.e., it had no mountains, no hilly terrain, counter-argued, “**our people are our mountains.**” This point is critical for one of the defining characteristics of the Southern African liberation movements under discussion is that they engaged large numbers of people. Like the National Liberation Front in Vietnam in the 1960’s and 70’s, these struggles mobilized seemingly unending numbers of people who consistently believed in the political program and participated in its activities. This pattern was particularly evident in the Mocambican struggle in Tete Province in the 1970-71 period; in the

Zimbabwean struggle's Eastern Front in 1977-78 and in the civil, labor and guerrilla struggles in South Africa(though the latter were of a deliberately limited character) post-1976 and throughout the 80's.

Another baseline belief common to those liberation movements from Africa to Asia to Latin America that were motivated along truly "transformative lines" was a clarity about who the enemy was that was being fought. Much to the disappointment of some of their supporters and sympathizers in Western metropolises, leadership of the liberation movements used to say (and largely govern themselves by a belief that) "they were not fighting individual white people; rather they were fighting a system of colonialism or a system of racism." The late Dr. Agostinho Neto, founder and first President of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola(MPLA), laid out liberation movement thinking on the objectives of their struggles when he posed the question: *Who is the enemy? What is the enemy? What are our objectives?* in his February 7, 1974 lecture at the University of Dar Es Salaam given in tandem with the 1974 Pan African Festival. He answered himself saying:

To answer our own question, we would say that the enemy is colonialism, the colonial system, and also imperialism, which sustains the former, to the point of being the principal enemy...

A people's struggle for political power, for economic independence, for the restoration of cultural life, to end alienation, for relations with all peoples on a basis of equality and fraternity-these are the objectives of our struggle. These objectives are set by defining who is the enemy, by defining who are the people and what is the character of our struggle, which is a revolutionary struggle affecting not only the foundations of the colonial system but also the foundations of our own society, as a nation and as a people...

In the same talk, Dr. Neto expressed very cogently and very movingly the philosophy of himself and the MPLA when he said, reflecting on what twenty-some years of personal experiences in the liberation struggle had taught him:

In my opinion, the national liberation struggle in Africa cannot be disassociated from the present context in which it is taking place; it cannot be isolated from the world. A worker's strike in England, the imposition of fascism on the Chilean people or an atomic explosion in the Pacific are all phenomena of this same life that we are living and in which we are seeking ways to a happy existence for man in In this world.

President Neto's emphasizing these points and doing so during a public lecture adjacent to the 1974 Pan-Africanist Congress in Dar Es Salaam is a critical contribution to thought and theory surrounding national liberation movements. At that particular time there was tremendous upheaval in especially the diasporic communities about the question of working with or fraternizing with white people. Part of UNITA's conscious outreach to the Black American population, in particular, was based upon projecting themselves as the "truly black" formation, as opposed to the MPLA's composition which was full on "mulattoes." A couple years later, April 22, 1976, the widely-respected and acclaimed West Indian scholar, Walter Rodney, took people to task for pursuing such an emotional and un-thoughtful line of analysis. He said in a speech at Howard University:

To declare for Blackness is one of the easier things to do. Once one—uh—recognizes the opportunities inherent in that situation. (laughter) But surely we need to go further than that. We need to examine firstly, whether the reality in Angola was the reality as portrayed by UNITA. we need to

go further and ask whether the historical experience of Angola could be so easily assimilated into the historical experience of Black people in the U. S. that Afro-Americans should run to make a judgment on Angola on the basis of some knowledge that they had that so-and-so was married to a white. Or that so-and-so was a mulatto.

Because the central understanding that we must reach is that any situation must be examined on its own historical merits. What is called "race" in the U. S is not the same thing as that might be called race in Angola. In fact in this country, those who are all called Black, or used to be called Negro, if they went to Angola, they would be distinguished many as Mulattoes. If we want to understand Angola and the complex of the relationships between social strata and race, etc., we must then understand Angola. We cannot sit in Washington or in Detroit, and imagine what we are seeing around the block is Angolan society.

Another characteristic of these liberation movements was that there was a shared vision of an alternative organization of society. This dimension of the struggles of the liberation movements was an essential element in all the struggles. The people being mobilized for the struggles believed that achieving another type of society was not only necessary but was possible.

The Pakistani scholar and activist, the late Eqbal Ahmad put it clearly and succinctly in his widely-read 1965 publication, "Revolutionary Warfare: How to tell When the Rebels Have Won." There he wrote:

Once a revolutionary movement enters the guerrilla phase its central objective is to confirm, perpetuate and institutionalize the moral isolation of the enemy by providing an alternative to the discredited regime through the creation of 'parallel hierarchies.' *The major task of the movement is not to*

outfight but to out-administer the government. [Emphasis Added]

Liberation movements are not terrorist movements. It is not as simplistic a matter as the hack-neyed and trite ditty 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' would have us believe. As I pointed out in a 1974 lecture "Regaining Their History: The National Liberation Movement Against Portuguese Colonialism:"

Liberation movements by their very nature are involved with two tasks, both carrying out a liberation struggle (usually armed but not necessarily limited to that form) and preparing an independent society. We can identify four basic functions, which must be carried out by the liberation movement as it gains control of territory and by the post-independence (i.e., nominal political independence) government as it emerges:

- 1) ***The economic***, engaging and maintaining the broadest number of people in the processes of national production;
- 2) ***The political***, organizing and mobilizing the people for the leading role in national decision-making efforts;
- 3) ***The administrative***, servicing the new society with necessary technical expertise, in most instances this entails building new mechanisms for services which the colonial structure because of its very nature would not provide, e.g., services for the elderly and other non-profitable members of the society; and
- 4) ***The military***, physically expelling the enemy and creating the controls to assure his not returning, e.g., the necessity of arming the civilian population in Sekou Toure-led Republic of Guinea especially after the 1970 invasion attempt.

There is as well an interrelatedness among these functions. For example, the military struggle benefits from the success of the administrative sphere in the latter's providing a sound educational

program or structure of medical services. (Particularly, the latter in terms of getting people medical care; curing problems as soon as possible and keeping health and spirits on a positive note).

Then there is the interpenetration of political and military considerations. The notion of the scholar, Egbal Ahmad, that the military struggle is only effective to the degree that the enemy is out-administered is a further example of this kinship of functions.

Since we will be constantly referring to the national liberation movement in Guine-Bissau, we may once again look to the thinking of Amilcar Cabral for further amplification:

"We have liberated more than 80% of our national territory. We shall liberate the rest. We shall liberate the Cape Verde Islands. Step by step, we construct our State. Our present position is that of an independent nation with a part of its national territory, notably the urban centers and the islands, still under foreign occupation. Through this struggle, we have conquered the right to our own personality in the international field."

(Amilcar Cabral, late Secretary General of the PAIGC during a visit to the USA in 1972)

The question of a national liberation movement, like all questions having to do with social change and societal development, must be posed within and accompanied by an appreciation of the specific historical circumstances that spawned that movement.

So it was that in all the liberation struggles of Southern Africa, from Angola to Malawi, from the Congo to South Africa, people mobilized and fought based on believing that there would be an end to the exploitative patterns of forced crop production, taxation, slavery, slave labor, forced sexual relations and other hated practices that together comprised the system of colonialism. The

poem that follows below, "If You Want to Know Me," by Noemia de Souza, captures and links the suffering of the Mozambican people under Portuguese colonialism and their earlier suffering under slavery.

If you want to know me
Examine with careful eyes
This bit of black wood
Which some unknown Makonde brother
Cut and carved
With his inspired hands
In the distant lands of the North.

This is what I am
Empty sockets despairing of possessing life
A mouth torn open in an anguished wound
Huge hands outspread
And raised in imprecation and in threat
A body tattooed with wounds seen and unseen
From the harsh whipstrokes of slavery
Tortured and magnificent
Proud and mysterious
Africa from head to foot
This is what I am

If you want to understand me
Come, bend over this soul of Africa
In the black dockworker's groans
The Chope's frenzied dances
The Changana's rebellion
In the strange sadness which flows
From an African song, through the night.

And ask no more
To know me
For I'm nothing but a shell of flesh
Where Africa's revolt congealed
Its cry pregnant with hope.

Ending colonialism and the attaining of national independence then was a major, if not **the** major goal of African liberation movements. But none of the serious liberation movements limited themselves to merely getting political independence-in much the same way the substantive civil rights movements and civil rights leaders in the USA never limited themselves to being able to sit in restaurants, ride in the front of buses, or sleep with white people. Read the memoirs of Rev. King and James Foreman and/or the minutes of SCLC or SNCC meetings and what comes across repeatedly is a broad program calling for change and transformation in many, many sectors of society. From Samora Machel's pronouncement that the emancipation of women was the essential pre-requisite for change in Mozambique to the belief of all the ANC leadership from Luthuli onwards that the struggle in South Africa was one aimed at freeing the whites as much as the blacks, what one sees is a commitment to systemic change, not simply changing the skin color of those doing the governing.

Guinea-Bissau's September 24, 1973 Proclamation of Independence, for example, declared: *"The State of Guinea-Bissau assumes responsibility for promoting the economic advancement of the country, thereby creating the material basis for the development of culture, science and technology, with a view to the continuing improvement of the social and economic living standards of our population and with the ultimate aim of achieving a life of peace, well-being and progress for all our country's children..."*

[The African Liberation Reader, Vol 3, p. 209]

Thus, the new state of Guinea-Bissau committed “to achieving well-being and progress for all its children.” It was this stress on shaping a new society, not merely expelling the enemy, that distinguished the national liberation movements from other nationalist projects. As Namibian scholar and former SWAPO member, Henning Melber, succinctly put it:

The anti-colonial movement’s proclaimed goals and perspectives were not only about fighting the oppressive and exploitative system of apartheid colonialism. The liberation struggle was at the same time about creating conditions for a better life after apartheid-not only in terms of political and human rights but also with regard to the inextricably linked material dimensions to human well being and a decent living of those previously marginalized and excluded from the benefits of the wealth created (to a large extent by them). (as quoted in Saul, John, “The Strange Death of Liberated Southern Africa,” unpublished essay, April 2007)